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Home on the Range:
The Impact of the Cattle Trails on Indian Territory

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Much has been written about the cattle trails of the 1870s. The cowboy has assumed a prominent role in the legend of the West. The Plains Indians Wars have likewise received their share of literature. The Indians of the West also became a significant part of Western lore, often as antagonists. What can often fall to the wayside is how the cattle trails and the Indian tribes impacted each other and what happened after the wars and the trails began to decline. The cattle trails that went through the heart of Indian Territory left a major impact on the Indians living there. The cattle industry fostered trade early on, provided food during tough times on the reservations, and it created a new economy for the tribes. Like many stories in the history of the American West, the boom of the cattle trails inevitably helped cause a bust for the Indian tribes in the opening of Indian Territory to pioneer settlement. The cattle industry of the late 19th century helped the Indian tribes make the transition into American society and Oklahoma statehood by creating an economy for the tribes, providing food during harsh seasons, and introducing their leaders into the American political and business world.

What would eventually become cattle trails had originally been created as supply routes connecting military forts and camps from Texas, through Indian Territory, into Kansas.¹ The forts had mainly been created as outposts to maintain peace between the Plains Indians and travelers heading west and to protect the newly arrived tribes relocated from the east. These forts also served as provision points and agencies for these eastern tribes, like the Five Civilized Tribes (Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creek, and Seminole.)

Cattle ranching was not new to the Five Civilized Tribes. They had been herding cattle since early colonial days. Open range cattle herding had been a major part of Indian economies and had been learned from southern pioneers. Cattle were even driven and sold in Virginia and Pennsylvania markets. When these tribes were relocated to Indian Territory, they took cattle with them and continued to open-range herd the cattle along the Red River and Arkansas River. With all of the open land that was available to them, the cattle herds grew considerably large, some even growing to 240,000 heads.²

By 1847 the Five Civilized Tribes were already driving cattle to markets in Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana and earned a significant portion of their income from cattle export. The cattle were mostly Mexican black cattle interbred with Missouri stock and they were gathered together in roundups. Full-blooded Indians, however, did not engage in much of the labor involved in the roundups. Rather, roundups were handled by mixed-bloods, a few white employees, and mostly by slaves.³

¹ Gary Kraisinger and Margaret Kraisinger, *The Western: The Greatest Texas Cattle Trail, 1874-1886* (Newton, Kansas: Mennonite Press, 2004), 54, 59.

² Michael F. Doran, "Antebellum Cattle Herding in the Indian Territory," *Geographical Review* Vol. 66, No. 1 (Jan. 1976): 49, 51, 53.

³ *Ibid*, 54, 56.

One of the primary cattle trails was named for Jesse Chisholm, who was a half-blood Cherokee and an early trader and explorer in Indian Territory. He was fluent in many native languages and was known for being a great trader and businessman with other tribes. He used the Texas Road and Indian Trails which connected military and trading posts, and he became very familiar with all of them and the region as a whole; at one point he was sent by Gen. Arbuckle to lead a group heading to California. He was a sort of Kit Carson of Indian Territory (he actually did meet Kit Carson) since he was an explorer, used by the military and tribes for peace negotiations, and was respected by many for his trading.⁴

Chisholm was one of the first to become a regular and respected trader with the Comanches. He worked on behalf of by Sam Houston to negotiate with the Comanches and was a trading representative between the Eastern Tribes and the Comanches. His land was a cattle ranch and he helped drive some cattle for local trading. By 1867 cattle were being moved down a trail bearing his name, not because he was renowned for cattle driving, but because he had regularized the route in his trading.⁵

Long before the cattle trails became popularized, the Five Civilized Tribes were already actively engaged in the cattle industry. They were able to utilize their western expanses and their eastern homes in Indian Territory to use cattle as their primary source of income. They had been able to recognize the potential of the Southern Plains in cattle ranching prior to the Civil War and prior to major white movement through the area. However, the removal of their western lands to the plains tribes as reparation for their support of the Confederacy harmed the Five Tribes' cattle potential. So, when the Texas cattle trains later began to move through Indian Territory, the Eastern

⁴ Stan Hoig, *Jesse Chisholm: Ambassador of the Plains* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), xii-xiii, 48, 52.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 41, 146-149, 161.

Indians were not unfamiliar with the trade and were likely interested in finding a way to adapt it to their economic needs in the absence of their own western range land.

The first cattle trains were already moving down the trails in Indian Territory in the 1860s when the Southern Plains War began. The Five Civilized Tribes allowed the cattle trains to travel on routes through their territory, like the Shawnee Trail, heading toward Missouri and eastern Kansas. As the railroads in Kansas continued westward, the cattle trains moved west, but in the background of these moves were conflicts and war with Southern Plains Indians. Cattle herds moved across the battleground of the Sappa Creek Massacre only weeks after it happened, the Chisholm Trail was backed up in traffic out of fear of Indian attack on the Western Trail.⁶

As the Indian Tribes were forced to remain on reservations, they needed cattle stock to supply food. Camp Supply provided escorts to cattle drivers in order to prevent conflicts between Indians and the cowboys. The troops also escorted the drivers in order to protect Indian farms from the damages caused by the cattle herds. The Comanches were known to stampede herds and even kill steers for food, causing losses to the cattlemen and delaying their journey to Kansas.⁷

As cattle herds began to move through tribal land, Indians demanded a fee from cowboys. Usually the fee was anywhere from one to three heads of cattle.⁸ The Western Indian Tribes were also familiar enough with cattle to know what good and bad cattle were, and they demanded good cattle, although they did not always get it.⁹ One cowboy wrote about an experience encountering Indians demanding a cattle fee: “

⁶ Kraisingers, *The Western*, 50, 52, 61.

⁷ Ibid, 66, 81, 83.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Gary Kraisinger and Margaret Kraisinger, *The Western Cattle Trail, 1874-1897: Its Rise, Collapse, and Revival* (Newton, Kansas: Mennonite Press, 2014), 171-172.

Their chief did the talking to our boss. He demanded one hundred of our best beef cattle, cut from the lead of the herd. Indians were not fools when considering beef. The boss told him “No,” but said that he could have some from the drags of our herd which were cripples and the ones that were getting foot sore, and as our boss stayed with this the Indians got mad... We threw our bed rolls on the ground and everything that we thought would stop a bullet or an arrow or protect ever a part of our bodies... When the chief got within about one hundred yards of us he stopped his outfit and raised a white flag on a stick which was to show us he had accepted our terms...”¹⁰

Events like this probably encouraged the fears and stories of Indian attacks on cattle trains. Not to mention that Kiowas and Comanches had a reputation for raiding Fort Sill’s stocks to steal horses and mules.¹¹ Most cattle trains simply paid the fee in order to avoid conflict. The Indians justified their charge by reason that the buffalo were being killed by whites and that the cattle herds were damaging their farmland and making it difficult for other animals to graze on.¹²

All of the tribes across Indian Territory, especially the Western Tribes, faced hardships in finding enough food to feed themselves. Sheep and goats were initially provided to the Plains Tribes in western Indian Territory in the hopes that they would settle into farmers. Most of the sheep and goats were killed outright or left to be killed by wild animals. Some cattle were also provided, and it was noticed at the time that the Indians appreciated the cattle far more than the sheep.¹³ With the government falling short on the amount necessary to sustain the Indians, the movement of cattle through their land gave them the opportunity to acquire more food without the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Timothy A. Zwink, “Fort Sill: The Formative Years,” in *Early Military Forts and Posts in Oklahoma* edited by Odie B. Faulk, Kenny A. Franks, and Paul F. Lambert (OKC: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1998), 107.

¹² Kraisingers, *The Western*, 83.

¹³ Wilbur S. Nye, *Carbine & Lance: The Story of Old Fort Sill* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 249, 250.

aid of the government. Cattle were purposefully driven to Fort Reno in order to be distributed to the various tribes in order to compensate for the lack of official government provisions.¹⁴ Since the buffalo were mostly gone, the cattle would have to do. If it had not been for the large and consistent herds of cattle, many more Indians could have starved or bands may not have survived the winters.

Starting in 1859 and continuing to 1885, Kansas began to pass quarantine laws on cattle due to Texas Fever.¹⁵ As a result, cattlemen began, not only to move their trails westward to avoid the quarantine lines, but also to seek ways to keep their herds in Indian Territory to fatten until they were ready to be sent to market by rail. The Cherokees had previously used their Outlet Strip for cattle herds, but as a result of Plains Tribes being relocated to Indian Territory, they became separated from the Outlet and were unable to utilize it.¹⁶ The Cherokee Tribe decided to make the best of this situation by leasing the land out to cattlemen for grazing. The Cherokees were able to lease the Strip to the Cherokee Strip Livestock Association for \$100,000 per year, and soon doubled it to \$200,000 per year.¹⁷

Other tribes took up the opportunity to make money off the cattlemen by making grazing agreements. Leases were technically illegal because the Federal Government owned the land, so in order to get around this technicality, official leases were not made between the tribes and

¹⁴ W. Edwin Derrick, "Fort Reno: Defender of the Southern Plains," in *Early Military Forts and Posts in Oklahoma* edited by Odie B. Faulk, Kenny A. Franks, and Paul F. Lambert (OKC: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1998), 116.

¹⁵ Kraisingers, *The Western Cattle Trail*, 242-243.

¹⁶ Peter Iverson, *When Indians Became Cowboys: Native Peoples and Cattle Ranching in the American West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 43.

¹⁷ Shawn Holliday, "Oklahoma's Cherokee Outlet and the Development of Cowboy Music and Poetry," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* Vol. XCIV, No. 2 (Summer 2016): 153.

cattlemen, but rather grazing agreements were made.¹⁸ The money made from these agreements became known as “grass money.”¹⁹

Tribes gradually began to favor cattle herds on their land because it helped supply them with necessary food. The rations given by the government simply were not enough to be able to feed everyone sufficiently, so the Indians, particularly in the west, relied on the cattle trade to provide extra food. At times this meant that the Indians would forcibly seize cattle, but often this meant the cattlemen would make agreements with tribes to provide food in exchange for rangeland. Grass money could even be used to buy cattle from these cattlemen in order to grow the tribe’s own herd.²⁰

Severe crop shortages in 1881 caused one Indian Agent, P. B. Hunt, to offer land for cattlemen to use in exchange for some heads to be given to the agency in order to feed the various Indian tribes.²¹ Prior to this, the soldiers of Forts Reno, Cobb, and Sill, had to patrol the cattle trails in order to keep wandering cattle, or troublesome cattlemen, off of reservations. Hunt decided that the Indians should try to raise cattle. In 1885 a delegation of chiefs traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet with the President to discuss the government creating formal leases with the cattlemen. Their meeting failed to sway the President into creating leases, but the Western Indians were advised that they could make their own leases with the cattlemen.²² The government would not create the leases for them. The Indian Tribes began to create leases with cattlemen to allow grazing

¹⁸ Robert M. Burrill, “The Establishment of Ranching on the Osage Indian Reservation,” *Geographical Review* Vol. 62, No. 4 (Oct., 1972): 528.

¹⁹ William T. Hagan, “Kiowas, Comanches, and Cattlemen, 1867-1906: A Case Study of the Failure of U.S. Reservation Policy,” *Pacific Historical Review* Vol. 40, No. 3 (Aug., 1971): 344.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 338, 339, 344.

²¹ Wilbur S. Nye, *Carbine & Lance*, 257.

²² *Ibid.*, 258-259.

in exchange for money or heads of cattle. The *Cheyenne Transporter* newspaper even published pictures of the brands of the legitimate, paying ranchers in each issue.²³

The federal government later developed a problem with the illegitimate leases and independent Indian action, so Congress decided in 1890 to have all Texas cattle in Indian Territory removed. Some tribes, like the Kiowa and Comanche, ignored the order at times and continued to allow cattlemen to ranch on their land in exchange for more money.²⁴ The Osage, however, requested an annulment of the order.²⁵ Cattle began to return in 1891 and Congress allowed for leases under five years to made for grazing. The Kiowa/Comanche and the Osage all began to lease large sections of their reservations for cattle ranching and began to increase their own herds in the process. \$75,000 was raised by the Comanche from grass money and was used to buy lumber for new, permanent houses for Indians.²⁶

Quanah Parker was a chief of the Comanche Tribe that became extremely influential for his tribe and its interactions with cattlemen. He was a member of the delegation that traveled to Washington in 1885, and following that trip, he grew more into a businessman in the American sense. Like Chisholm, Parker was also of mixed-blood. In exchange for grass money, he provided protection and labor for the cattle herds, and this sort of business dealings helped earn him a good reputation among cattlemen.²⁷ He became good friends with leading cattlemen, like Dan Waggoner, S.B. Burnett, and Charles Goodnight, and as a result, he made a lot of money that he shared with the tribe.²⁸

²³ Derrick, "Fort Reno: Defender of the Southern Plains," 118.

²⁴ Hagan, "Kiowas, Comanches, and Cattlemen," 345, 346.

²⁵ Burrill, "The Establishment of Ranching on the Osage Indian Reservation," 538.

²⁶ Hagan, "Kiowas, Comanches, and Cattlemen," 347.

²⁷ Larry C. Floyd, "Quanah Parker's Star House: A Comanche Home Along the White Man's Road," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* Vol. XC, No. 2 (Summer 2012): 137-139.

²⁸ Clyde L. Jackson and Grace Jackson, *Quanah Parker: Last Chief of the Comanches* (New York: Exposition Press, Inc., 1963), 135-136.

Parker was also a pivotal figure in adjusting views on Indians. He was able to adapt to American customs in business and politics. In one story of him describing business dealings he said: “

You see, me open desk and sit down in chair so – and lean back, and put feet up on desk and lighting seegar, and hold newspaper in front of me, all same white-man sabe? Then by-m-by white man he come in and knock at door, and he say: ‘Quanah, me want talk t’you a minute.’ And me swing round in chair – so – and puff lots of smoke in his face and me say, ‘What can I do for you today?’”²⁹

In addition to being a businessman for his tribe, he made many political connections. He was a friend of President Theodore Roosevelt, most notably, and he was a regular visitor to Washington during Roosevelt’s time in office. Parker was even part of Roosevelt’s Inauguration Parade.³⁰

Parker is a good example of how the cattle industry created a new economy, or revitalized an old one (for Eastern Tribes), for the Indians. Parker benefited from the cattle industry and was able to help his tribe make much needed money from the business. The Cherokees also made large amounts of money by leasing their Strip, and the Osages also made money by leasing territory. For a short amount of time, the cattle industry was mutually beneficial, economically, to both the Indians and the cattlemen. Parker had gained a new sort of power: political. Instead of fighting wars to try to reestablish power, Parker was able to use diplomacy and negotiation to become a powerful man on the Plains.

In addition, Quanah Parker’s political influence and businessman nature are indicative of a change in the culture of the Indians that took place at this time. It could be argued that, during

²⁹ Ibid., 123.

³⁰ Ibid., 133, 143.

this time, many Indians successfully “civilized,” as was the intended goal of the reservation system. American customs were used more, American clothes worn, permanent homes built, and a mostly sedentary agricultural society had been built. Indian leaders, like Parker, were more involved in negotiations with businessmen, livestock associations, corporations, and politicians, both state and federal, than at any previous time in their history. He had a respectful command of American politics that reflected in his many friendships with politicians.

The cattle trails and the ranching that developed out of it allowed the tribes to survive on the Plains and settle into the land on their reservations. Once they did so, they were able to develop political and economic activity that was recognized by white men and the government, despite the fact that the government tried to stop it by ordering cattle out of the Territory and not recognizing leases.

All of the ranching agreements eventually undermined the power of the tribes. The growth of ranching leases and the isolation of the Cherokee Strip from the tribe led to ideas that the Indians were not using the land.³¹ The argument was that since the Indians were not making proper use of their land, the land should be opened to settlers in order to make the land more productive.³² Nearly every tribe resented this idea, Parker fought against it in politics through his connections to Washington, and even cattlemen joined the tribes in opposing settlement openings. The tribes wanted to keep their land and what rights they had to it, and the cattlemen wanted the land to remain clear for open-range ranching.³³

Conclusion

³¹ Peter Iverson, *When Indians Became Cowboys*, 46.

³² Burrill, “The Establishment of Ranching on the Osage Indian Reservation,” 531.

³³ Jacksons, *Quanah Parker*, 138.

The very activity that had provided for the tribes in their transition to reservation life and began to provide a short boom to their economy, led to end of their reservations and the opening of their land to settlers. The success of the ranchers and the growing amount of leased ranges made potential settlers angry as they desired to own the land was simply be used for cattle grazing. For the Indians, it was yet another stab from the government against their wishes, showing that their land and hopes really had no value in Washington.

Kansas passed their final quarantine law in 1885, and by 1889 the first wave of white settlement had entered the area.³⁴ Almost every year following opened more land to white settlement. The Panhandle was added in 1890, several central reservations, like the Potawatomi's, were opened in 1891, the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation opened in 1892, the Cherokee Outlet was opened in 1893, and the last was claimed by 1906.³⁵ By 1907, Oklahoma was a state and the reservation system was effectively ended within it.³⁶ Cattle had been and became the main force of the economy in Indian Territory. Tribes made money from tolls on driving cattle, exporting their own cattle, and leasing their land for grazing. In addition, they supplemented their rations with cattle, without which, they could likely have starved. The development of the cattle ranching industry provided stability for the Indian Tribes on reservations, but the impression that this economic development made ultimately caused the reservation system to come to an end.

³⁴ Edward Everett Dale, "The Ranchman's Last Frontier," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* Vol. 10, No. 1 (June, 1923): 40.

³⁵ Edward Everett Dale, "History of the Ranch Cattle Industry in Oklahoma," *Agricultural History Society Papers* Vol. 3 (1925): 321.

³⁶ Dale, "The Ranchman's Last Frontier," 40.

About the author

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